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Beginning School

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Abstract

Differences in management and organizational skills of effective and less effective classroom managers are presented. Findings are drawn from extensive observations of 28 third-grade teachers who were observed from the beginning of the school year. Findings suggest that teachers who are successful managers arrange to prevent problems from occurring and the establishment of useful routines begins early in the year.

Beginning School

As summer ends, posters, pennants, and mobiles are hung from ceilings. Desks and chairs are arranged in circles. Construction paper letters and numbers are pinned to newly covered bulletin boards. Games and flash cards, record players and records are taken from summer storage and restored to their rightful places in classrooms, all in preparation for a familiar fall ritual . . . the beginning of school.

Many teachers express the conviction that the most important, the most anxious, and the most exciting time of the school year is the first day. This is the time when one "pulls it together" or "loses it", when one is supposed to "get off on the right foot" or have trouble the rest of the year. This is the time when one should, above all, be firm, although one can "relax" later.

These concerns, while expressed by nearly all teachers at some time or other, are felt particularly keenly by new teachers. Beginning school has been considered a crucial part of the school year, but it is of special importance to teachers who will have their own group of students in their own classrooms for the first time.

Although there is agreement about what the well-organized classroom looks like, there has been very little classroom research that provides teachers with specific advice and suggestions about achieving the goal of the smooth, well-run classroom. Research has had little to say to the new teacher, student teacher, or teacher who wants to improve his or her management skills and keep students happily and busily engaged.

In light of these needs and interests, we at the Texas R&D Center for Teacher Education undertook a study of classroom management and

organization at the beginning of school (Evertson & Anderson, Note 1; Anderson & Evertson, Note 2; Emmer, Evertson, & Anderson, Note 3; Anderson, Evertson, & Emmer, Note 4). Our overall purpose was to learn more about the details of establishing and maintaining a well-run classroom and to thus get beyond global statements or truisms that do not really help inexperienced teachers. Specifically, we wanted to see what happened at the beginning of the year and how it affected management throughout the year. Our objectives were threefold:

1. To learn what general principles of organization and management are most important at the beginning of the year, and which are most important for maintaining effective classroom management through the year;

2. To collect a large body of very specific examples of management skills and techniques (and the consequences of them) to illustrate these general principles. It was felt that anecdotes and case studies would have tremendous value in communicating the importance of management principles;

3. To develop a methodology that combined both qualitative and quantitative observation techniques to provide a rich but objective look at classrooms.

Methodology

The study included 28 self-contained third-grade classes located in eight schools in a large urban school district. Each class was observed eight or nine times during the first three weeks of school, and was seen either on the first or second morning of school. The observation schedule for the rest of the three-week period was arranged to sample mornings and afternoons of all days of the week. Each observation session

lasted from 2-1/2 to 4 hours, resulting in an average of 25 hours of observation for each class during the first three weeks of school. Observations of the same classes continued throughout the year, but were less frequent (about twice a month). The information discussed in this article is taken from the first three weeks of school.

Two major instruments were used to describe the classes: the Narrative Record and the Student Engagement Ratings. Observers in the study were trained to take narrative records describing all events relating to organization of classrooms at the beginning of the year. Narratives addressed over 60 specific questions about organization and management.

In addition the observers completed Student Engagement Ratings every fifteen minutes. Engagement was considered an important short-term outcome, since other research had indicated that active on-task engagement was related to longer-term outcomes such as achievement (Rosenshine and Berliner, 1978). The observer classified each student in the classroom in one of four categories of engagement:

a. On-task academic The student was working on an academic assignment (e.g., reading, writing, listening to teacher explanation).

b. On-task procedural The student was performing a procedure or routine which was not academic in nature, but which was expected and desired by the teacher (e.g., lining up for a transition).

c. Off-task sanctioned The student was not performing an academic or procedural task, but was not misbehaving (e.g., going to the water fountain).

d. Off-task unsanctioned The student was involved in an undesirable activity (e.g., talking when this was not allowed, shoving in line, being inattentive).

The Student Engagement Ratings for each class from the second and third weeks of school were combined to yield an average on-task and off-task rating for each teacher. The teachers were ranked and the highest and lowest "on-task" averages were compared by identifying those characteristics in the Narrative Records which seemed to differentiate the two groups. Several important principles consistently distinguished the two groups of teachers.

Introductions to the classroom

Teachers who are better managers appeared to have a sound knowledge of the kinds of behavior they expected from their students. They had thought through the routines that students would need to understand and master to function in their classrooms. They were able to break these routines down into discrete steps that they could then teach their students in the first few days and weeks of school. These teachers were keenly aware that their students' first experience with the classroom was a very important event. They made certain that students entered the classroom in an orderly manner and were greeted at the door. In many of these classes, students received name tags, put them on, and went to their assigned seats in minimal time. More effective managers began at the first moment of the first day of school to establish themselves as the instructional leaders of their classrooms.

In contrast, in classrooms of the less successful managers, the students' first introduction to the teacher and the room was less systematic and more dis organized. Frequently, students entered without being greeted by the teacher, because the teacher was busy with some other task. Students entered in groups, talking to each other, and exploring

the room on their own, without precise instructions about what they were expected to do, or where they were to sit.

After the students were seated in the classroom, the more effective managers prepared a careful introduction to the room, explaining to their students what each area was and how it would be used throughout the year. Places were provided for students to store their lunches, coats, caps, and other belongings.

In contrast, some of our less effective managers ignored the important information involved in introducing students to their environment. Much of what could have been of personal interest to students was passed over quickly or ignored. Explanations of how various areas in the room were to be used were made only in response to student requests for information, or after students had begun to misuse the equipment.

Introducing students to one another was also an important step in getting acquainted. This was the first occasion for students to make a statement or to contribute something to the group. The better organized teachers tended to make this an easy task in which students could succeed.

In contrast, the less effective managers tended to omit this important step or to handle it in such a way that students found it difficult to respond (e.g., speakers were interrupted; no one could hear because of noise).

To summarize, the more effective managers assumed leadership in their classrooms from the beginning, familiarizing students with their environment and the appropriate ways of functioning in it. Less effective managers frequently left out important information, passed over

important procedures too quickly, or presented too much information, making their students' first experience in their classroom confusing.

Presentation of Rules and Procedures

One important component was the presentation of rules and procedures. They provide the context in which students can operate successfully or unsuccessfully in classrooms. Virtually all the teachers in the two groups had rules and procedures for their students to follow. What differentiated the more effective managers from those who were less effective was the degree to which these rules and procedures were integrated into a system of routines in the classroom and how effectively this system was taught to the students.

Better managers planned to guide their students' behavior carefully during the first few days. They appeared to arrange the instructional content so that the important routines of the classroom became a part of the curriculum. These teachers seemed to understand that information and order were needed for students to operate successfully in the classroom. Successful managers demonstrated ability to break down these tasks and routines into components that students could understand and practice.

The less successful managers did not really present procedures for lining up, for use of areas of the room, to their students on the first morning. Therefore, some students began asking for permission each time they wanted to do something.

The more successful managers realized that rules would need to be repeated; they would need to be practiced successfully, and that the consequences for breaking rules would have to be spelled out very clearly to the students. Successful managers monitored their classrooms in order to be sure that the rules and routines would be practiced and that the stu-

dents were being guided toward behaving appropriately in their classrooms.

During the first weeks of school, the requirements for students' performance were made very clear to the students in the well-managed classrooms. These requirements were simple, and the work was easy, because the information about how they should perform this work successfully was given to them. Each step in seatwork was carefully explained and the teacher watched each student as he or she performed each task. One procedural task was to move through activities such as pencil-sharpening, getting paper, and selecting ditto sheets. Each child was given clear instructions about what these procedures were and the teacher watched closely while the students performed the tasks, calmly correcting and praising those who were accomplishing the task appropriately. The more successful managers were able to anticipate what the students' questions might be regarding their first assignment in the classrooms, to break down the steps, go through them carefully, and allow students to practice, thereby maximizing their chances for success.

In some of the less successful teachers' classrooms, there were long periods of time when students had nothing to do, but were waiting for instructions while the teacher was otherwise engaged. In one classroom, during the first 30 minutes of the first day, a very difficult math ditto was handed to these students, who were unable to complete it successfully.

In summary, the better managers made certain that students had maximum opportunities for success, and the less effective managers tended to inappropriately assign either difficult tasks, or no tasks at all to their students.

Monitoring the Classroom

Monitoring was another important activity in wellrun classrooms. More effective managers observed students as they went through the important routines. Monitoring was not for the purpose of catching students in misbehavior, but was used to diagnose students' needs for information and to provide information quickly. The successful teachers were able to carry out their morning's plans with few problems, because they had planned the day carefully enough to make sure that monitoring could be accomplished easily. For example, many of the tasks from the first several days of school were accomplished with students in one group, facing the teacher, facing in the direction where they would be focused primarily on the teacher and his or her instructions for them.

Conversely, some of the less successful teachers expected students to go immediately to work on an assignment while the teachers worked at their desks. They planned activities that made monitoring extremely difficult, such as dividing students into small unsupervised groups, starting students on self-paced work materials, or making other individual assignments. Even if the teachers had deliberately tried to monitor carefully, the situation was arranged so that monitoring was extremely difficult. Teachers could not diagnose the students' needs for information or give them signals about their behavior.

In summary, the more effective teachers arranged their classrooms and planned activities that allowed them to monitor their students more easily and more thoroughly.

Signaling Appropriate Behavior

The initial presentation of rules, procedures, and expectations for behavior is not usually sufficient to ensure that students will be able

to cooperate. Therefore, we looked at enforcement of these behavioral expectations and on the signals that the teachers provided students about their behavior. We felt that such signals would provide information to the students about what was and was not the best way to operate in the classroom. Sometimes, teachers used deliberate signals to point out important tasks that the students should be accomplishing, sometimes these signals occurred inadvertantly through omissions, such as when the teacher did not respond in the way she said she would.

There were, again, differences between the successful and less successful managers. The more effective managers found opportunities throughout the morning to point out to students when they behaved appropriately. They also appeared to have a keen sense of timing, which told them when discipline began to break down. They kept the group alerted and on-task by noting in advance what behaviors they especially approved of and by complimenting the class as the students went through these routines. Frequently, their signals were nonverbal, pointing fingers, smiling, or raising eyebrows when certain behaviors did not occur that were supposed to. These teachers emphasized positive behaviors that were very specific and sincere, and said things like, "I like the way Monica held up her hand when she wanted to answer." The teachers' persistent use of this technique indicated to the observers that these teachers were searching for positive examples of behavior as models to the children about how to perform effectively. In this way, they provided information to the students so that they could learn the approved routine quickly. It is important to note here that the praise, when delivered, was obviously sincere and not embarrassing. That is, no students were praised at the expense of other students. It became evident as the first

day began to move into the first afternoon of school that all students had equal opportunities to receive genuine praise for good performance.

On the other hand, our less successful teachers did not offer such signals to their students until a situation had occurred that already needed correction. Then, instead of pointing out to the offending students that they had misbehaved, they frequently offered general praise to other students in the form of "I like the way you are all working." Sometimes this served to get students' attention briefly, but it did not provide the specific information to the students about what behaviors were desired.

Responses to unsanctioned behavior were also different between more successful and less successful managers. Through careful monitoring and insistence on following through, successful teachers began on the first morning to let students know that they would be consistent, credible, and fair. These teachers expected that their demands for students performance would be met. At the same time, they also communicated that they liked their students, and that they were warm, human people, who would make reasonable demands that could be met successfully.

Less successful managers, on the other hand, were less able to communicate these messages to their students. The most common failure was inconsistency in enforcing their rules. These teachers failed to note instances of undesirable behavior. Their specific signals for attention were either inconsistently applied, failed to hold student attention, or varied so that students were unsure about what was meant. The better managers, on the other hand, made certain that their signals were consistent, and when they called for attention, the students quickly responded and paid attention.

In summary, the better managers appeared to have clear ideas about the behaviors they wanted to encourage and were alert to any instances where they could be reinforced. The less effective managers were not consistent about reinforcing their students for appropriate behavior.

Summary

Teachers who were better organizers demonstrated a superb ability to analyze the tasks of the first few weeks of school, whether these be classroom procedures or academic assignments given to the students. The better teachers were obviously breaking down procedures and assignments into their component parts and presenting them to the students in small steps and in a logical order which could be understood easily. In contrast, the less effective managers often presented too much information at once to the students or left out important details. The task-analysis skills of the more effective teachers were evident in two ways. The more effective teachers initially presented information to the students clearly and made very simple unambiguous demands on them. They then continued to analyze student behaviors, looking for the elements of appropriate or inappropriate behavior.

Before the morning began, the better organized teachers had clear and reasonable expectations about what their students were and were not able to do; what they would accept in the students' behavior; and what they would encourage. The teachers had thought out in advance what rules and procedures they wanted followed in their classrooms, and what they needed to tell the students about these expectations.

The better organized teachers communicated these expectations to the students from the very beginning. They used as much time as was necessary during the first few weeks of school to let the students know what

was expected of them, using the curriculum content to reinforce their management systems. After the students had internalized certain routines and expectations, they could focus their time and energy on the curriculum for its own sake, knowing that their management systems would support their instructional efforts.

The better organized teachers remained sensitive to the students' concerns and needs for information. They seemed to analyze situations (i.e., induction into a new school year) and plan their procedures, rules, and activities to match students' needs. They presented demands at the beginning that were clearly understood and that led to success. The apparent result was that the students in these classrooms could attend to the teacher without interference from other immediate concerns and questions.

The more successful teachers monitored their students closely during the first few weeks in order to provide immediate feedback. Monitoring also provided feedback to the teacher about each student. Only by gathering information about how the students were reacting to initial assignments and class procedures would the teacher know when he or she should move to the next step.

Although there is no substitute for the first year of actual classroom teaching, our findings suggest that the more information a teacher has about what to expect and what needs to be planned, and the more time and care taken in determining the kinds of information students will need, the better he or she is likely to do in establishing an effective classroom management system.

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